Approved For Release 2007/06/15 : CIA-RDP99-00498R000100200122-7

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WORCHESTER GAZETTE (MASS.)
12 APRIL 1980

Reporting for the CIA

Stansfield Turner, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, displayed a remarkable lack of understanding of the press this week when he told the American Society of Newspaper Editors in Washington he couldn't see why news organizations would object to their employees working at the same time for the CIA.

"I am sorry," Turner was quoted as saying, "I don't understand the connection that you make between serving your country and being free. I think you can do both."

Serving the country by freely informing its people is the goal of the American press. It is precisely for that reason that reporters and editors don't want to be on the payroll of the government — any government — while they are trying to report the news.

This is one of the distinctions between our system and that of the Soviets.

It is essential for foreign governments and citizens to be absolutely certain American reporters are not an arm of the American government. This is difficult enough without having the head of the CIA talking about enlisting newsmen in intelligence gathering.

Because the press is free and not affiliated with the government, there is a vast amount of information freely available to anyone to wants it here.

Foreign intelligence agencies are said to have a relatively easy job gathering information about the United States because newspapers, magazines, radio and television make so much information available to all. If the CIA wants to know what reporters find out, they can read American publications and listen to American radio and television.

Turner said he has approved using American journalists to gather information three times, but the arrangements were never completed. He is entitled to ask journalists to cooperate, although George Bush, who directed the CIA in the mid 1970s, specifically prohibited using journalists to gather information.

If Turner feels such connections to be proper, it is incumbent on the journalistic profession, as organizations and as individuals if approached, to make it clear just where they stand.

Serving the country isn't the same thing as serving the CIA.

The best way for journalists to serve America is to report information fairly, clearly and independently — to everyone.

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